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## Leaven

Volume 1, Issue 1 - April/May 2021

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# From the editor

**Greg Daly reflects on the path to creating the first edition of *Leaven***

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It's hard to believe almost fifteen months have gone by since a conversation on a bus, in a world that now seems impossibly far away, saw me asking a friend whether he thought there might be scope for a new religious magazine in Ireland, even as a digital project. Reeling off a list of people I thought could be good contributors and gifted designers, I said, 'I keep thinking something thoughtful, orthodox, fresh, and fully across Church teaching could be really good.'

Chats with friends who liked and were keen to support the idea followed over the next few weeks, but while they were encouraging they also had hard, testing questions, not least around whether a new publication might be duplicating things done elsewhere. Why do this? 'Because,' I said in frustration, 'we're dying!' Pope Benedict used to talk of how the Church of the future would need to be a creative minority, and it's too often that caught up as we get in visions of being a minority, even at times a beleaguered one, we forget the retired pope's call for creativity. Being a majority, in any case, isn't always a good thing, and Pope Francis has reminded us

that our mission is 'not really determined by the number or size of spaces that we occupy, but rather by our capacity to generate change and to awaken wonder and compassion'.

If we're to be a living Church we can't just be a consuming one, relying on others to feed our imagination and our spirits: no, we need to be creative, we need to bring our own Catholic lenses to the world, to be God's hands in the world, and to nurture and develop Christian talent so others can do this in turn. What's more, Irish Catholics need to create in a way that's suited to Ireland; it's not enough to absorb or replicate whatever is said or produced in Britain or America, as though cultural differences count for nothing, as though the assumptions and quarrels of other societies exist in identical forms here. Yes, learning from Catholics elsewhere is vital, but depending on them... no, that can't be healthy.

As the months have gone by, our vision has sharpened, with a brigade of smart, creative young Catholics ready to get involved in shaping and contributing to a fresh and authentic publication, one

that would try to engage with Ireland and the world as it is, and that might stand at least a small chance of, as the Pope puts it, generating change and awakening wonder and compassion. We might not succeed, of course, but it won't be for want of trying!

Our ambition is to showcase what a humane and intelligent Catholicism can entail, through a mixture of articles, interviews, discussions, and lighter essays. In this sense the plan is that *Leaven* should be as 'catholic' as it is Catholic, with articles covering pretty much anything, as long as a Catholic lens is brought to bear, whether it be politics or philosophy, science or music, history or economics, literature or sports. That theology, spirituality, liturgy and other obviously Church-related things are on the table too goes without saying, but the main thing is that we're following St Paul's advice by talking about everything, and holding – as best we can – to what is true. The end result, we hope, is a magazine we'd like people not merely to enjoy, but to feel optimistic about sharing with family, friends, students, pupils, and parishioners.

The pandemic has made things more difficult, of course, but it hasn't stopped us, and at times has proved the mother of invention: in a world of zoom chats, round-table discussions are surprisingly manageable, while with our churches and shops closed or inaccessible, producing a digital publication rather than a traditional print one has seemed an obvious move.

It's been a pleasure and a privilege to work with so many gifted and committed young Catholics over the last year, and to engage with people lit up with love for Christ and positive without being naïve,

committed to sharing what the Faith has to offer without watering it down or falling into traps of contrarian, reactionary, or cynical thinking. Building up this group further, and developing writers for the future, is very much part of our vision, so if you have ideas for things that you'd like to write about, do get in touch – our contact details are on the credits page.

What's more, while we're solidly committed to a domestic core of writers and designers, we realised from the first that we should look beyond Irish Catholic bubbles if this was to work: yes, the Catholic Church in Ireland has plenty to offer the world, but so too does the world have plenty to offer the Catholic Church in Ireland. Contributions from Catholics outside of Ireland and Christians from other traditions in Ireland have been sought to keep us learning, and to remind us to keep our windows open. Looking outside is vitally important, after all, and ventilation is especially important in these pandemic times!

News in recent weeks that the Irish Church is to embark on a synodal path leading to a national synod in the next five years, may, if anything, make the launch of *Leaven* all the more relevant. Ireland's bishops have, after all, been considering this since 2018's Synod on Young People, and in the coming years having a forum for young Irish Catholics – and in particular young Catholic women – will be all the more important. With the synod hoping to address such things as the need to promote peace-making and welcome, the family as a domestic church, and the secularisation of society, it looks like *Leaven* may be arriving just in time.

Welcome to *Leaven*. We hope you enjoy it.

- Greg

# A revolutionary myth

**Theological illiteracy is hurting our ability to live together, Tom Holland tells *Leaven***

*Interview by Greg Daly*

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus,' wrote Edward Gibbon in his Enlightenment classic, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

To listen to Tom Holland, however, Gibbon could hardly have been more wrong. Already having written two bestselling histories of Rome – *Rubicon*, about the fall of the Republic, and *Dynasty*, about the beginning of the Empire – Tom is now working on his third Roman history. 'It will be about the Roman Empire in its heyday, which Gibbons famously described as being the happiest period of history – the Antonine age, a period when the Empire is at peace but, it's just unspeakably brutal!'

'The underpinnings of that peace are brutal!' he continues. 'It's founded on unbelievably brutal treatment to people beyond the frontiers, who are essentially dehumanised and targeted for genocide, I mean literally targeted for genocide. And within the framework of the Empire, the

institutional violence, the contempt for the poor, the contempt for the vulnerable is just a constant.'

Until a few decades ago the focus of the people who studied the Roman Empire has tended to be on its elite rather than those at the bottom tiers of Roman society, Holland says, pointing out that it took the rise of Christianity to change how Romans looked at the poor and the vulnerable, especially slaves and unwanted babies.

'Right thinking about Christianity really opens your eyes to the way in which just how revolutionary the Christian message is,' Tom explains, 'and I think it requires you to look at the Roman Empire to probably get a sense of how revolutionary it is and how contingent some assumptions that we have today really are when set against the backdrop of other ways that humanity might be able to organise itself.'

This idea is central to Tom's controversial 2019 best-seller, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*, subtitled 'How the Christian Revolution Remade the World' for the US edition and available in paperback since late last year.

'The thesis of the book is essentially that, as I've often expressed it, we in the west



are goldfish, and the water that we swim in is Christian, and the weathering effects of Christianity of the past 2000 years on Western culture have been so profound that we barely even recognise them for what they are,' he explains. 'There are exceptions to this really, but by and large, the criticisms that atheists, or secularists or liberals, or whatever might aim at Christianity are themselves couched in Christian terms. So Christianity is judged and found wanting according to a rubric of moral standards that are patently of Christian origin themselves.'

The spark for the book was struck when he was giving a talk about a previous book, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, which questioned many of the traditional foundations of Islam, essentially saying that the stories surrounding the beginnings of Islam were back-projections from a century or more later.

'I remember giving a talk about it and a Muslim in the audience saying "Why have you done this? You'd never do this about your own beliefs," and I felt a kind of sting of truth in that accusation,' he

says. As a liberal, secular humanist, he believed he had a good sense of what he terms the foundation myths of his creed, but felt he needed to examine these more systematically. 'When I tried to trace them back to the Enlightenment it was very clear that they went a long way before the Enlightenment. Writing the book was a kind of an attempt at self-discovery as much as anything else for me,' he says.

#### RECEPTION

Surprisingly to Tom, given how much criticism of Christianity the book contains, the book has generally been warmly welcomed by Christians. 'The people who've not been particularly enthusiastic about it are those I guess who would kind of self-identify as humanists, who would see their liberalism or their humanism as being a kind of ideological marker that they feel distinguishes them from Christianity,' he says.

Whether or not people simply have too much invested in the notion that their modern worldviews don't rest on Christian foundations, what seems clear

Early in 2016 Tom visited Sinjar in Iraq a few weeks after the Kurdish liberation of the town from ISIS. Standing in a place where Yazidis had been enslaved and crucified not long before was, he has said, something close to a religious experience.

is that the Christian underpinnings of our world are glossed over as a matter of course nowadays. One obvious example of this is the tendency for historians to use the terms 'BCE' and 'CE' – 'Before the Common Era', and 'Common Era' – instead of the more traditional 'BC' and 'AD', concepts rooted in Bede's recognition that the Incarnation was the central point in time.

'Essentially that's a kind of paradigm of where we are in the West now, but it's as though, you know, you just put a thin layer of wallpaper over something, and you completely lose the contours of what's beneath the wallpaper – you don't at all. It's not fooling anyone,' says Tom.

'I mean, saying 'before the Common Era' -- what's common about it? Time in the West, and indeed, you know, in North Korea or anywhere in the world is measured by the Christian calendar, and so time to that sense is Christianised. The great acts all around which our sense of time revolves is a deeply Christian one grounded in a highly theological notion of the incarnation,' he continues. 'And so much of what we take for granted, be it the calendar or be it our values or whatever – our attitudes to sex, our attitudes to family, or attitudes to marriage, our attitudes to how we should live, our attitudes to how society should be structured – are rooted in a seedbed of Christian theology.'

Unfortunately, he says, we have reached a point where – in general – our society is not merely theologically illiterate, but proud to be theologically illiterate.

'The commanding heights of our culture now are occupied by people who are proud to say they know nothing about religion because it's all nonsense and they've moved on from it,' he says, likening this to people maintaining that they've no interest

in children's books, because they're adults who have moved on. 'But they're not really kidding anyone, because human rights, the dating system, the idealisation of something called the secular – I mean all of these are rooted in theology and make no sense without theology.'

South Africa, curiously enough, is a country that stands as an exception to the current fetish for theologically illiteracy; an especially powerful part of *Dominion* looks at how it was Nelson Mandela's Methodism that underpinned his conviction that forgiveness was needed in his country.

'That is a theologically literate country,' says Tom. 'And what enabled the peace process to happen was that both sides spoke the same theological language. So, the language of repentance and forgiveness was fundamental to what happened. There was a recognition that if you confess your fault then you will be given absolution. And of course that's not at all in a non-Christian culture. The language of repentance was fundamental to its success.'

Pointing out that the Romans, for instance, had no difficulty in thinking about Britons and Numidians as barbarians, he says it's not necessarily obvious that things like slavery, empire, and racial oppression are wrong, and that the idea that these things are bad, and that the basic idea that all human beings are fundamentally equal comes from Christianity.

'It's this kind of nagging sense that all human beings are created equally in the image of God, and that there is no Jew or Greek,' he says. 'If there is no Jew or Greek, then there's no Black or White. The apartheid regime was rooted in theology because as long as it was able to convince itself that it was theologically justified it

could carry on, but the moment it lost that certainty it was doomed. And then the narrative started to kick in of repentance and forgiveness.’

A similar phenomenon was at work in the American civil rights movement and responses to it, he says. ‘It was, you know, the power of Martin Luther King, the Reverend Martin Luther King – again coming from that kind of Baptist-Methodist-dissenting tradition – that was able to summon white Americans to a recognition of their sin, while also promising forgiveness and reminding them that all human beings are created equally in the image of God. And therefore, there is a Christian route to repenting for what was wrong and gaining absolution.

‘That was fundamental to the narrative of the ‘60s, even though it was incredibly contested. The fact that the civil rights movement happened – it wasn’t fundamentally a political debate, it was a theological debate. And it was one that the civil rights campaigners won.’

The civil rights movement helped inform the feminist movement, he later observes, and indeed the gay rights movement too, but he suspects a contemporary breakdown in common theological languages and ideas has hampered the current Black Lives Matter movement.

‘That language has kind of gone – that shared language, the language of Exodus, the language of the Gospels. It’s not shared anymore. And so people have to try and construct their own paradigms and their own ways of expressing it, and obviously because it’s not shared therefore it’s often more contested,’ he says. The meaning of Martin Luther King’s ‘taking the knee’ was clearly understood in his day as an expression of our common humility before God, coming from a Baptist tradition, he

says, but that the meaning of this isn’t so obviously grasped nowadays when exceedingly wealthy sportspeople do it.

‘It has a slightly different resonance, and also, it seems, a specifically American resonance,’ he says. ‘One of the reasons why the civil rights movement had such an impact beyond American shores was that it could tap into these kind of Christian ideas – Christian myths – that were shared,’ he says, contrasting this with Black Lives Matter as an apparently much more distinctly American movement, ‘tied up with how as non-Americans one views America, and tied in as well with a



kind of capitalism, which is better able to appropriate it because it’s free-floating.’

## **FORGIVENESS**

There’s a case to be made that we’re increasingly a kind of public society where we demand apologies, and even demand atonement, but do not grant forgiveness. Is this a fair criticism of where we are now, and if so should we think of that as a distortion of how our societies are informed by Christianity?

‘I think that having said that Christianity is the kind of dust born on the breezes that

we breathe in, it's not what it was,' Tom admits, adding that this has happened even over the course of his life. 'When I was at school, I studied Scripture, so, you know, we studied the Bible. I kind of absorbed it in the way that people for generations before me – across Europe, across America – had done exactly the same, but that's no longer the case.'

Explaining how his daughters went to a Catholic primary school and an Anglican secondary school, Tom says that they began doing comparative religion in secondary school, with the course giving a clear impression that all religions are basically

says. 'But I think my children's generation – it's nothing to them, they don't know anything about it. Really, they're not interested in it. They're not interested in it enough to reject it. It's, it's just, you know, it's nothing.'

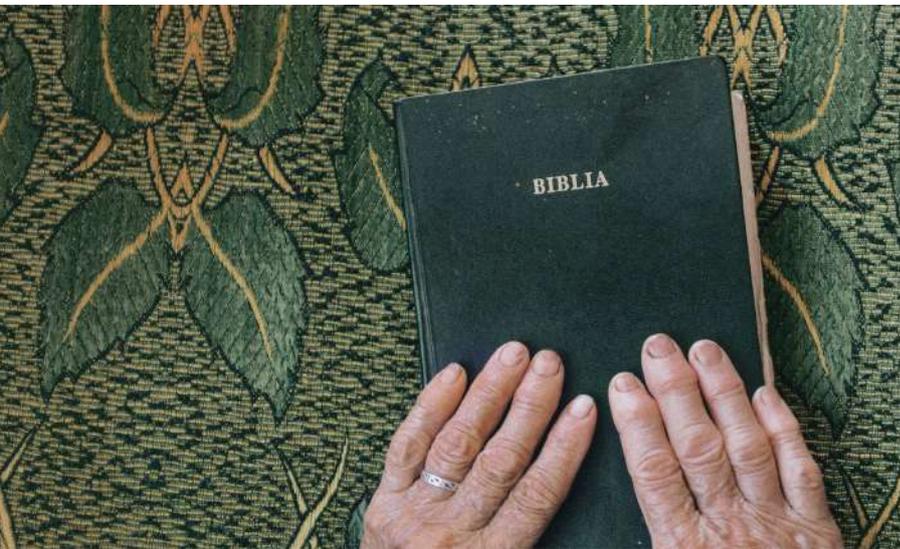
At the same time, he says, they're still living in a world that's utterly saturated with a Christian outlook. 'All this, you know, "we've got to be kind, we've got to be caring, to look after refugees", all this kind of stuff, which they absolutely all have kind of absolutely taken on board, is rooted in deeply Christian assumptions, but while they know that you have to be kind to refugees, they don't know about the parable of the Good Samaritan. They don't know the theological underpinnings for it,' he says.

Without these underpinnings, he continues, without Biblical stories and liturgical rituals, the assumptions they hold can float about. 'They're rooted in Christianity, but they're not anchored to it, if that makes sense. Because they're not anchored to it, the anchor is kind of rocking around all over the place and, and so we're kind of drifting. It's a kind of free for all because even people don't even realise what it is that they're arguing about.'

This has the effect, Tom says, that some of the most heated arguments of our time are effectively arguments about variants of Christian teaching, and what should be emphasised; debates about abortion can be characterised as arguments between the Pauline idea that a woman's body is sacral such men shouldn't tell her what to do with it and the basic principle that all human life is sacred and made in God's image, while debates about homosexuality see an emphasis on the sin of sodomy clash with an emphasis on the virtue of monogamous love. 'All the culture war

the same. 'They just wear different kinds of dress and have different feast days or whatever, but basically they're all the same, and they all kind of essentially uphold the same liberal assumptions and values – that's what's written into the curriculum,' he says, saying this naturally carries the implication that there's not much point bothering with any of them.

'And so I think that the generation of militant humanists and atheists are clearly still deeply Christian because they're shaped by it, they're wrestling with it, they're theologically engaged with it,' he



arguments are contained within a kind of Christian bubble, but because we don't recognise that they're Christian anymore, it just kind of floats around,' he says.

With specific reference to forgiveness, he ventures that hostile stereotypes of finger-wagging preachers aside, tendencies to condemnation are less specifically Christian than they are more broadly human. 'I think that that reflects the fact that that's a kind of inherent instinct within human beings, whereas the great thing about Christianity, about the particular figure of Jesus and the Gospels, is that it's much more complicated than that, that he's always forgiving people, and that he hangs out with sinners. The love of Christ for sinners is in a way that most subversive aspect of the Gospels, and kind of hardest to comprehend.'

Pointing out that Christ's example has always made it impossible for the Church to crudely say that prostitutes, for example, are evil, Tom says he thinks the impact of the Gospel stories is not always what it should be.

'I remember I went to a sermon talking about the parable of the Pharisees and the tax collector,' he explains, 'and the vicar said we're kind of blunted to the implication of it: we've come to think that tax collectors are good, that tax collectors raise money and enable us to build schools and roads, that it's good to pay taxes, and Pharisees are kind of whitened sepulchres and evil hypocrites. So, of course, we don't get it, he said: you've got to think of the Pharisees being a kind of an aid worker, and you've got to think of the tax collector as being a paedophile. That takes you back to the shock of it.'

'I think that without familiarity with those stories, without the familiarity of the subversive figure of Christ, it's very, very

easy just to dwell on the condemnation and forget the need for forgiveness. And I think that that is something that has evaporated,' he says.

As references in *Dominion* to the penance books used by the Irish monks of early medieval Europe make clear, what condemnation there has been in Christianity has always been intended to be – at least in principle – medicinal, with forgiveness, mercy, and the benefit of the doubt built in. Obviously this was and is often forgotten even within Christian contexts, but it seems almost wholly absent from society at large now. Why might this be?

'I mean, Christianity works, in purely Darwinian terms. Its success means that it must work; it must speak and articulate something deep within human nature, because otherwise it wouldn't have worked the way it did,' Tom begins. 'But again, I think that once it gets unmoored from theology, and from Scripture, and from ritual, then it mutates very quickly. And I think that therapy is a kind of a version of that. The medicinal thing is exactly it, but you need a sense of sin for it to work really, and that's something that we've become nervous of, I think for Christian reasons, because we were reluctant to kind of condemn a sinner.'

'Again, that's perhaps of Christ, but without sin none of it really makes sense and it kind of blunts and becomes distorted in Christian terms. I think that's the reason,' he says.

The net effect of all this, he says, is that we would not be exaggerating to speak of a crisis of the West.

'I think it is a crisis,' he says. 'I think it's a crisis because for all the reasons I've been saying, I think we basically still have this fundamental identity but we're reluctant

to acknowledge it, and we've kind of lost the self-knowledge that enables us to see that. So we're kind of groping around looking for ways to define ourselves'

### UPBRINGING

Tom was raised Anglican, and one wonders reading *Dominion* whether he would have written a different book had he been raised Catholic. Might he have been less prepared to think in terms of Scripture and Paul specifically, and more in terms of Peter and a sacramental view of creation, for example?

'Well that's a great question, and of course that goes back to the goldfish thing, that my water is of course Anglican,' he says. 'And so I try to be neutral and objective, insofar as I can, but I'm aware that it's, it's much more a Protestant than it is a Catholic perspective. And really that's the very last section of the book, where I talk about the specifically Christian influences on me. Essentially, my mother and my grandmother. It's basically my attempt to try and kind of factor that in for the reader, so that people can understand where it is that I'm coming from. Because I can't help, you know, what my upbringing is. And I ultimately can't entirely emancipate myself from it.'

The Pauline letters, he points out, are the earliest extant Christian documents, typically written within two to three decades of the Crucifixion, such that knowing Paul is vital if one wants to understand early Christianity, but at the same time he says that he hopes he's succeeded in showing how the papacy is the primal revolutionary force in Latin Christendom, with the Middle Ages as a whole being a kind of 'papal revolution'.

He focuses less on Catholicism in the

wake of the Reformation, he admits, but says that in a sense the Reformation is 'a kind of further trigger effect of the primal papal revolution', adding that much of how Christianity has 'evolved to become kind of post-Christian is mediated through Protestantism'.

There is, he adds, always a kind of tension when one talks about Christianity. 'Do you emphasise what's revolutionary about it, the process of change, the capacity of the Spirit to move and transfigure and alter things,' he asks, 'or do you emphasise the heft of tradition and of the past and the way in which Christian practice is rooted in what's been done for generations before that?'

Tom's mention of being raised Christian by his mother and especially influenced by his late godmother recalls a section in the book where he talks about the crucial role women have played through history in passing on the Faith. Given both the opportunities today's women have beyond the domestic sphere and the alienation many feel from the Church, is there a risk that this traditional mechanism of handing down Christianity will die out?

'Women are kind of fundamental to the growth of Christianity,' Tom stresses. 'Every study of how Christianity grew in the Roman Empire makes it clear that it grows through the agency of women more than anything else. And it's clear as well I think that over the course of history that it's women raising children as Christians that really serves to kind of bed it down. And so the fact that's no longer happening is one of the primary reasons why Christianity's cultural hold is fading, why people are not familiar with the stories and the rituals in the way – perhaps – that they were.'

To wrap up, I mention to Tom how when we last met in late 2019 – he said he felt he had reached the kind of Nietzschean point where he thought today’s liberal values are basically myths, and unfounded myths at that. Since then, though, I’ve read of him giving sermons in Anglican churches, so I’ve been wondering: has he become a churchgoer, and does he pray?

‘My mother prays for me, and for all our family and for everyone, and I fear it would be highly remiss of me not to pray for her in return. So, over the course of this past year I have prayed for her. And I do go to church, and I go to St Bartholomew the Great,’ he says.

The onetime Augustinian priory in the Smithfield area of London is, he says, ‘very Anglican, but also very high Catholic so it’s a kind of – it contains the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment; it’s both Protestant and Catholic; it’s very ancient, it’s very modern; it’s everything that I admire, and am kind of left in awe about in Christianity, so I do go there.’

As for belief in God, he still has problems – not least around the dinosaurs that have been an obsession of his since childhood – but they’re not holding him back.

‘Essentially what I would say is that I was a liberal, and I just came to realise that all my values are mythical. They have no objective basis – there’s no objective basis to believe in human dignity or to believe in human rights or anything like that, and if I want to continue to believe in them, I have to make a leap of faith. And if I’m to make a leap of faith I might as well hang for a sheep as a lamb,’ he says.

His immersion in the Christian past writing *Dominion* and since has changed him, he admits. ‘I kind of came out of it just feeling incredibly humbled and ashamed of the arrogance with which I had viewed the Christian tradition. How dare I think of myself as being superior? How dare I think that in the face of these colossal figures, who basically – I owe them everything!’

At this stage, Tom says, he thinks of Christianity as a myth – a profound, moving, dramatic, exciting myth, that is also, as J.R.R. Tolkien put it to C.S. Lewis, a ‘true myth’.

‘I see it as a true myth,’ he says. ‘I’m aware that there are lots of Christians who would see that as a cop out. But I can’t help it – that’s as far as I’ve got, but it’s further than I was two years ago.’ ■

Tom Holland’s *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* or in the US *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* is available in all good bookshops around Ireland and as audiobooks.

